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SENATOR CARDIN CALLS FOR A NEW, “MORE THOUGHTFUL” APPROACH IN IRAQ

We cannot ignore other competing needs around the world and at home

Washington, DC – **U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin** (D-MD), a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, participated today in hearings looking at Iraq from a military and political perspective after the current “surge.” An excerpt of his opening statement is below. The full statement is available at www.cardin.senate.gov.

Senator Benjamin L. Cardin:

“We are here today – after more than five years, 4,000 lives lost, 30,000 wounded, and \$600 billion spent – to once again re-evaluate our country’s strategy in Iraq. I welcome this discussion. Because I continue to believe it is imperative that we change course now, not next month, not next year.

“I first want to pay tribute to our troops and diplomats serving in Iraq with such courage and competence. I am humbled again and again by their skill and their sacrifice. Bearing witness to their service fuels my own conviction that we, our nation’s civilian leaders, owe them a strategy in Iraq and a global foreign policy that is worthy of their commitment.

“I’ve always believed invading Iraq was a mistake. I voted against granting our President that authority in 2003. I have opposed, from the beginning, the way this Administration carried out that effort once begun. Its strategy – I think everyone now agrees – was naïve and fatally flawed. But as much as we might wish it, we cannot change the past. This war was recklessly begun; we’ve got to find the smartest, most prudent way to end it.

“In a speech on January 10, 2007, announcing our ‘New Way Forward,’ the President explained his new ‘surge’ strategy to end the conflict in Iraq. He said that by adding 30,000 additional troops, ‘over time, we can expect to . . . growing trust and cooperation from Baghdad’s residents. When this happens, daily life will improve, Iraqis will gain confidence in their leaders, and the government will have the breathing space it needs to make progress in other critical areas.’ By pouring all our military resources into Iraq we were supposed to improve security and provide the government there the room to reach political reconciliation.

“In March, General Petraeus was quoted in a Washington Post interview saying, ‘no one’ in the U.S. and Iraqi governments ‘feels that there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation,’ or in the provision of basic public services. Only 3 of the 18 benchmarks have been accomplished.

“Thanks to the excellent work of our troops, and several unrelated factors – the Sadr ceasefire, the Sunni ‘Awakening’, and, tragically, ethnic cleansing – violence in Iraq decreased from its highest and most appalling levels. But the Iraqi government did not take advantage of relative calm to reach accommodation among its various factions. Local political and militia groups continue to struggle to amass power. Recent violence in Basra and Baghdad demonstrate that our troops continue to referee a multitude of civil wars and political power struggles – Shi’a on Shi’a in Basra and Baghdad, Shi’a on Sunni, Kurdish on Sunni, and the list goes on.

“Desperate for security, we are undermining our goal of stability. We are arming and paying Sunni militia to combat al Qaeda in Iraq, we arm Shi’a militia allied with Iran to combat other Shi’a militia that oppose the central government. I have yet to hear a clear strategy for how we will unite these disparate armed forces under the central government.

“Four million Iraqis have been displaced by this conflict. Half are in neighboring countries. All are running out of money creating a humanitarian and a security crisis throughout the region. If all were to try and return home, it would be chaos. We aren’t doing what we need to do to resolve the crisis.

“Nowhere in arming opposing militias, our involvement in intra-Shi’a violence, or our neglect of the growing refugee crisis, do I see evidence of a long-term strategy toward stability that will outlast our unsustainable military presence.

“So, this summer, we will be in a familiar place. Just as when the President announced the ‘surge’, we will have over 130,000 troops in Iraq, unacceptable sectarian violence, four million Iraqis displaced, and no political reconciliation to show for our efforts. We need a new strategy in Iraq.

“For years, some of us have been calling for a new approach; one that includes a changed military mission. Instead of refereeing warring factions, our troops should focus on training, counter-terrorism and force protection. Because that mission calls for fewer troops, we should continue phased redeployment past this July. Any effort must include stepped-up diplomacy. We need our nation’s most senior officials engaged in bringing other nations and international entities such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to the table.

“The world has an interest in a safe and secure Iraq. But in working toward that end, we cannot ignore other competing needs around the world and at home. We need a more thoughtful approach that will protect our troops and our all volunteer force, step up our diplomatic efforts, and internationalize the effort to bring stability to that country and to the Middle East.”

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